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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the personal experiences of one member of a task force considering improvements in Brigham Young University's Education Administration Program. The task force included members of the faculty of the university and representatives from the administrative ranks of a local school district. The report describes the introduction of one elementary school principal to the task force's purposes and procedures, her role as cochairperson of the group, the difficulties faced by the task force, the frustrations associated with limitations on the group's progress, failures of communication among task force members, and the task force's eventual success in finding ways to develop recommendations and to contribute to the program improvement effort. (PGD)

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"A Principal's Perspecitve: Lessons learned from a partnership experience."

By Bonnie Dahl
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My first recollection of the Administrator Preparation Task Force goes back to a phone call from the Superintendent, and in a district as large as ours, with 53 schools and 60,000 students, a phone call from the superintendent is a rare occurrence. Of course I answered that call with a bit of fear and trepidation, imagining all the potential disasters that might have precipated the call.

The superintendent was very cordial and asked me if I would like to represent the 43 elementary schools in our district and serve on a partnership task force with B.Y.U. He mentioned something about re-designing the Education Administration Program, gave me a time, date and place for the meeting and we said good-bye.

As I hung up, I remember feeling very flattered at being asked to serve on such an important task force, but at the same time, I felt overwhelmed with the overload of work stacked on my desk, and I wondered just how much time the task force would take.

At our first meeting, Dean Smith gave us a brief overview of the goals of the task force and then left the room. I looked around at the unfamiliar faces of the principals and B.Y.U. Faculty members and wondered how we would ever accomplish such an important task, and I felt even more stress when I was elected co-chairperson of the committee.

We were given a 45 page document that had been prepared by a previous committee. It contained their descriptions of the competencies necessary for a successful principal. We decided to take the document home, read it and meet again in a few weeks to discuss the document and its place in our partnership program.

With much eagerness and anticipation, I found a quiet place in my home and sat down to read the document. After reading the first ten pages of list after list of the competencies required of the successful principal, I began to feel very discouraged to think so much could be required of any human being. I then began to feel I was probably not even qualified to be a principal, let alone a member of the task force to design a program to train effective principals.

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I drove to the next meeting feeling discouraged and hopeless. When we met and discussed the document, I immediately felt better upon learning that all principals on the task force had the same overwhelmed feelings. Most task force members felt the document was far too complicated and needed to be condensed into a workable form.

We formed committees and assigned them the task of condensing different sections of the document. At our next meeting, things really became complicated. Everyone had different ideas as to the most basic competencies required of a successful principal. The more we tried to condense the document, the more stubborn many of the individuals became. Some of the principals used the time to air personal gripes regarding their overload of work and restrictions placed on them by their districts. Most principals were also very skeptical concerning the concept that a university would really listen to their ideas and make changes based upon them. Many principals felt this was probably an exercise in futility. Some B.Y.U. staff members became very protective of their program and talked at length on the reasons why certain elements of the doucment should be retained. One entire meeting was wasted while two B.Y.U. faculty members argued over the appropriate label for a particular curriculum concept. The rest of the B.Y.U. faculty seemed embarrassed and the principals felt their entire morning away from their schools had been wasted arguing over an insignificant issue. The principals could see the outcome of their argument would never matter to the final mission of the task force. Of course, now I am able to look back on this experience and realize why the professors could not let go of their ideas. They belonged to them,, they were taught these concepts and they were not about to surrender their turf without a fight.

As we left this meeting, a principal commented to me on the wasted morning. He said he could not afford to spend so much time awary from his building and felt we would never be able to make real changes in the B.Y.U. program. This principal did not attend the next meeting.

In our next few meetings, it became nearly impossible to sort out or come to consensus on important competencies. In fact, it became nearly unbearable and entire meetings were held with little apparent progress being made. A few of the principals began to feel the situation was hopeless and the attendance at meetings started to drop off. The co-chairpersons had to ask the superintendents to remind the principals to attend the meetings or assign replacements.

One B.Y.U. faculty member confided in me that his department really should not have much input in the program and he felt this task force had done all it could and should be abolished. Several principals expressed similar feelings. They could see little progress and felt they needed to spend their time at their schools. I never wanted to give up, but I was grateful for the 45 minute drive back to my school because it gave me a chance to clear my head after our mental sparring at the meetings.

We began to feel pressured to come up with some type of plan because Dr. Goodlad was flying in to review our work. In an attempt to reach agreement, we decided to work on all the things that could cause a principal to fail. We brainstormed these ideas and ranked them in order of importance.

We managed to pull our fragmented ideas together and Dr. Goodlad reviewed them. He did not give them rave reviews and suggested a review of the literature. The minutes of the meeting where Dr. Goodlad reviewed our plans were sent to all B.Y.U. faculty members and all principals. The minutes stated Dr. Goodlad felt our task force had done its job and should be abolished. I had attended the meeting and had heard Dr. Goodlad's suggestions of reviewing the literature. I called all of the principals and asked them if they had read their minutes. They were also very surprised to read that our task force was abolished. I called the secretary who had typed the minutes and she said a B.Y.U. faculty member had interpreted Dr. Goodlad's thoughts to mean the task force had finished its job and another task force should be formed.

I called Dean Smith and told him what had happened. He was very understanding and supportive and said our task force was to remain and finish the job.

We called another meeting and discussed the inaccurate minutes. We were unanimous in deciding to stay together as a task force. The fact that our task force was nearly abolished seemed to help us form a group loyalty. We decided to stay together and work to form a successful plan.

We also hired a graduate student to pull the current research together and then studied the results. This helped us focus on some important competencies mentioned in the latest research. We then started to talk of "how" to form an effective partnership between the schools and the University, we really made good progress. We discussed the concept of the mentor principals (mentor principals train the intern principals) and their roles in the field and of being active participants in the ongoing development of curriculum for the new Administrative Masters Degree Program at B.Y.U.

When Dr. Goodlad reviewed our final plan, it was very gratifying to find he liked our ideas and plans and felt they would work. Our many efforts and trials had finally paid off and it felt good!

As a principal, it has been personally satisfying to be on the partnership task force. Prior to my task force membership, my only experience with universities had been as a student. The university, as an institution, had always seemed to be an immovable object. One always needed to find ways to survive the rules and roadblocks set out by the university. The chance to really be heard by the B.Y.U. faculty was a very rewarding experience. It felt good to think principals could take an important part in forming the new educational administration program at B.Y.U. When sharing our task force goals with my collegues, I find they are very enthusiastic over the concept. They feel relief over the chance to be heard and appreciated for their role in the educational scene; however, they are also very skeptical and feel real or lasting changes may not be made. As a member of the task force, I feel a real commitment and responsibility to make our plan work. I know this will take continued time and effort on my part, but

I am willing to keep participating because I believe so much in the positive influence of the effective principal on the education of children. Because I believe in this, I am proud to take part in B.Y.U.'s admirable efforts to improve the training program to help individuals become the best possible administrators. I am hopeful our plan will be successful because the task force is still in place and some of the mentor principals are also on the task force. This will make it possible for the mentor principals to make certain real changes are occurring and to provide continuous feedback to the B.Y.U. staff and the task force.